

23 June 1980

READING 5

'CONSCIOUSNESS' – AN EXPERIMENT

It's time we got away from theories and came back to observing at first-hand. The two newer (or shall we say 'fresher') groups are really getting somewhere – driving hard to get at the truth through the fog of past ideas, particularly about that still mysterious experience called 'Consciousness'.

Several key remarks were made last Thursday, particularly these at Dr. Connell's:

1. Mark T. I was wondering, while driving here tonight, about this question of being asleep. Is it possible to say which part of us is asleep when we forget ourselves, or is it too diffuse for that?

Dr. R. Quite easy. Put your finger on the middle of your forehead – *that part*. The part, Mark, which should have been silently alert while driving (so as to be ready for anything) but was in fact as you say. 'Wondering about this question of Consciousness!' Consciousness demands *not thinking*. It's a mistake almost universal in the West for over three centuries to equate Consciousness with thought. S.B. expresses the usual view:

2. Shirley B. I was thinking that you couldn't really be awake in one part and asleep in another. I just don't see how you could be intellectually awake without pulling the other centres out of sleep as well. Would that be true?

When asked if other people agreed with this. 'Certainly not' came from Mark and other cries of 'No'. Dr. Connell reminded them of Mr. Ouspensky's 'absent-minded professor who keeps losing his umbrella everywhere'.

The cause of this is well shown in the Zen story of the man carrying a lantern in the dark who bumped into a passer-by and exclaimed angrily. 'Look where you're going! I have a light.' Said the other. 'Your lamp has gone out, brother.' Consciousness is very fleeting but we go on acting on the assumption that we are still conscious.

Since this mistake is even more universal in all sophisticated societies today than it was fifty years ago when Mr. Ouspensky was lecturing in London, we want you now to try the experiment we used to do with him.

Here are his own words (First Psychological Lecture):

I will try to explain how Consciousness can be studied. Take a watch and look at the seconds hand trying hard to be aware of yourself and concentrating on the feeling '*I am so and so (Christian name) here, now*'. Keep all other thoughts away. You will find, if you are persistent that you will be able to do this for (up to) two minutes. This is the limit of your Consciousness, but if you try to repeat the experiment soon after, you will find it more difficult than the first time.

This experiment shows that a man in his natural state can, with great effort, be conscious of *one subject* (himself) for only two minutes.

Now try this (as we did with striking effect to newcomers in the Steinway Hall, New York in 1973.) Let the group-taker be the time-keeper so no one else need worry. After about three minutes he says, 'Stop' and asks what happened. Then try it again near the end of your meeting.

Is the repeat really more difficult or is it easier? Then during the week try stopping thoughts for a moment or two in varied circumstances and bring your observations along. That's the only way we can be sure we are describing the same experience when we talk of being Conscious.

Finally, we don't yet understand H.H's simile of the *'two houses'*. It expresses two different attitudes towards oneself. Whenever we forget that we are a Conscious being, besides a mere mind-body machine with no independent power of choice, we are in the little prison. Only in those moments in which our whole life appears like a dream when one awakes, do we realize this *is* a prison. And only when the body dies can we leave the little prison altogether and return to the 'Big House' from which we came here at birth.

But a Realized man knows it all the time, and we can become like him if we persist with some valid method like sincere Meditation and trying to remember Param-Atman at those momentary 'gaps' that we have been discussing.

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